

# The Hiawatha Point Walleye

BY BILL KLEIN PHOTOS BY HAROLD P. KLINE



# THE SILVER POINT OF AN EVENING STAR DROPPING TOWARD THE HAMMOCK OF NEW MOON OVER LAKE OKOBOJI, OVER PRAIRIE WATERS IN IOWA –IT WAS FRAMED IN THE LIGHTS JUST AFTER TWILIGHT.

—CARL SANDBURG

I could take you to the exact spot. Without GPS. Without a depth finder. Thirty feet under the Okoboji waters of Millers Bay. A rock pile just off Hiawatha Point. That's where he was almost sixty years ago. It's seared into my memory forever. Because it was my first walleye.

The Okoboji of the 1950's was a mute twin of today's lake. No 300-horsepower engines blasting cigarette-shaped boats across the waves. No swarms of jet skis screeching over the wakes of the monster crafts. Far fewer people. The summer winds carried mostly silence. Especially at night.

It was in the super silence and inky darkness of a new-moon night that my dad and I plied the waters two hundred yards off the dock of Hiawatha Point Resort. Me in the back seat facing the stern and he at the oars.

Under us was a 14-foot cedar strip boat hand made by the owner of the resort where we stayed.

Andrew Vestergaard was a stout Dane. Never without a hat. And, like the lake in those days, quiet. Hours would pass without words as I watched him at the boat-making trade in his small shop just across the road from the resort. The sweet smells of shaved cedar and pipe tobacco intermingled within the stucco building. Snippets of conversation didn't begin to satisfy my curiosity.

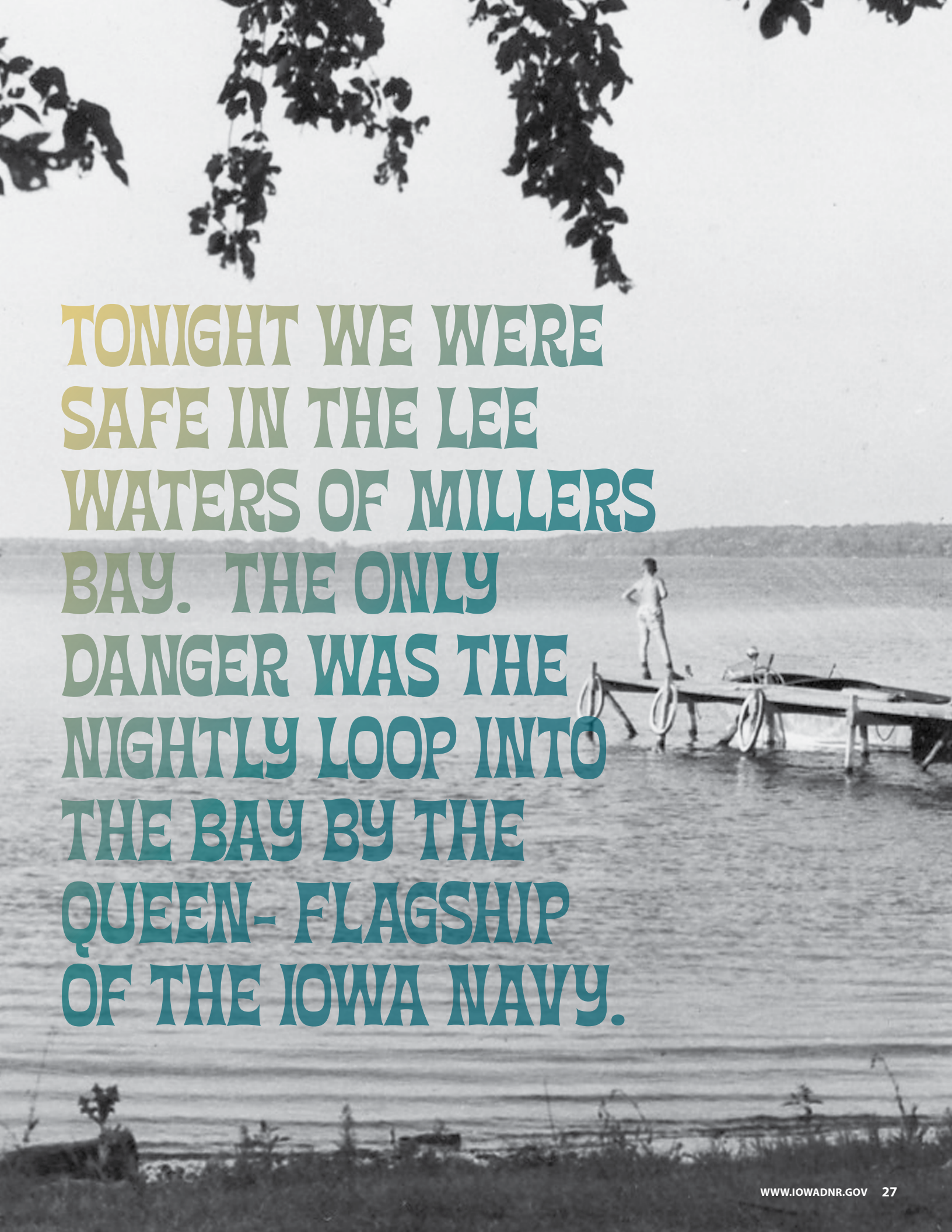
*"Where did you learn how to build boats?"*

*"My fadder,"* he would answer in his thick accent as he dipped another piece of cedar into a tank of water and clamped it into a gentle curve to help form the bow of the next boat. But most of my nine-year-old natterings were answered with but a patient smile. The grin began at the burl pipe in the middle of his mouth and curved gently



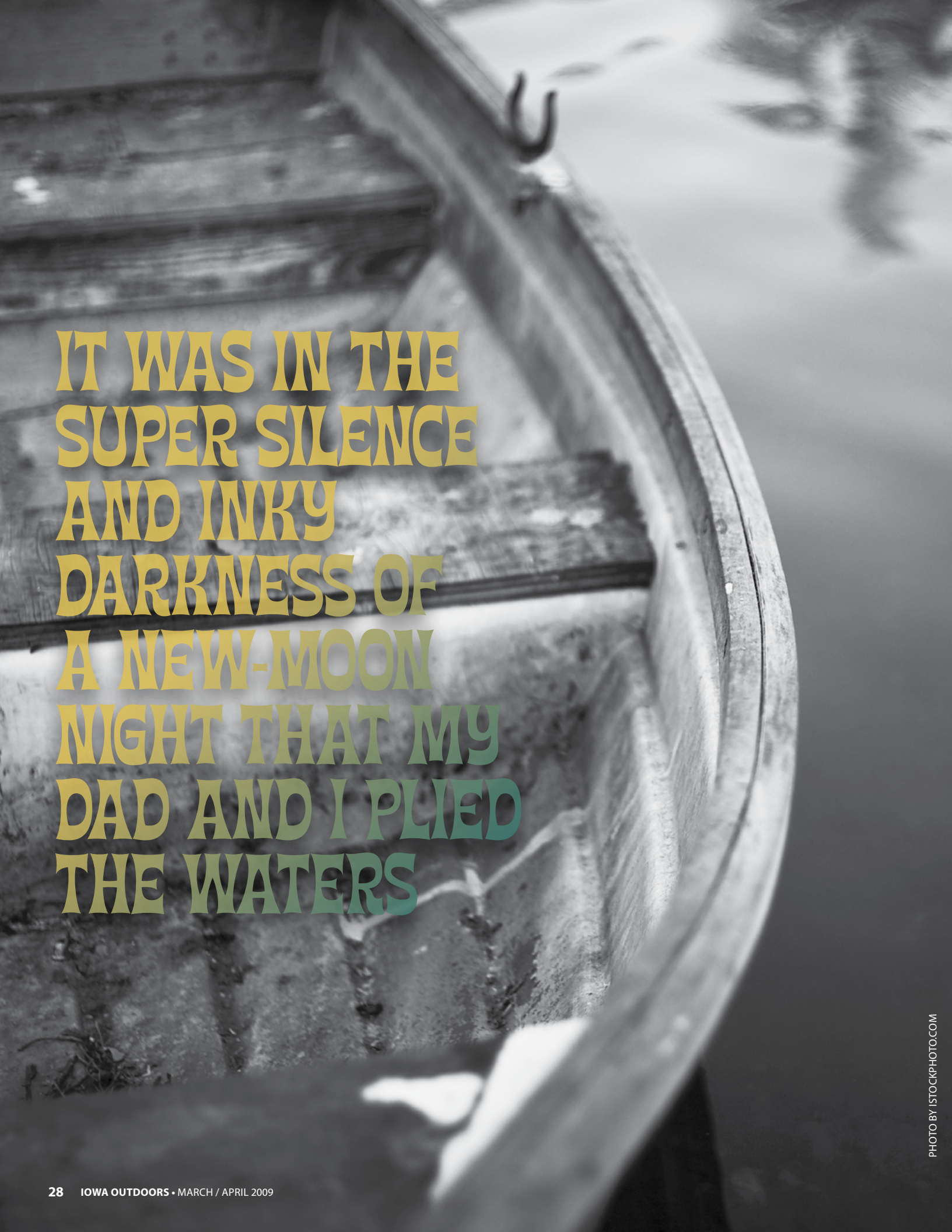






TONIGHT WE WERE  
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WATERS OF MILLERS  
BAY. THE ONLY  
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NIGHTLY LOOP INTO  
THE BAY BY THE  
QUEEN-FLAGSHIP  
OF THE IOWA NAVY.



A black and white photograph of a wooden boat, likely a canoe or small rowboat, on a body of water. The boat's hull is visible, showing wooden planks and a metal hook. The water is calm, and the background is slightly blurred. Overlaid on the left side of the image is a block of text in a bold, serif font. The text is color-coded: the first four lines are yellow, and the last three lines are a teal color.

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upward at the ends, like cedar strips in the water tank.

Oars were expertly shaved from cedar blanks. The blades attached with glue painted on from one of a dozen unlabeled jars and held in place by ancient wooden clamps featuring a spiral of hardwood threads.

It was with a set of these oars that my dad propelled us back and forth across the secret rock pile. Unseen by any digital contraption but sharply focused in my imagination. At the turns my dad would dip a cupped hand into the lake and dribble water into the oar locks to quiet them. Trolling was new to both of us. An intriguing tactic for normally anchor-bound fishermen. It was suggested by Mr. Vestergaard. Walleyes like their bait moving he taught. This was a fish known to us only in the pages of *Field&Stream* magazine.

Adding to the night's excitement, I was allowed to use my dad's best Pflueger rod and reel. This was truly the Big Leagues of fishing. And I was a player.

Normal fishing on West Okoboji in the 1950s was mostly a worm-and-cork-bobber affair.

When we were lucky enough to stumble into them, bullheads were plentiful. Well-muscled but slimy, they would bend a kid's rod to near breaking. They tasted good, but we tired of dodging their stingers while grunting slippery skins off with pliers.

The rare trophies were the pound-and-a-half perch. The pursuit of these scaled beauties first required a trip to Spud's Resort just across the canal from Vestergaards. There, in the office beyond the cooler of nightcrawlers, was a dark tank teeming with crawdaddies.

Baiting with these required nerves of steel and a deft hand. Gripping them just behind their beady eyes so they couldn't pinch you with their claws, you twisted their tails off and peeled them white. And then impaled this raw delicacy on a longer-than-normal perch hook.

But the mid-summer perch schools were hard to find. Emerson Bay was said to be teeming with them. It might as well have been a world away for a motorless boat. My dad was wary of outboard motors in those early years. Too loud for fishing, he cautioned, Scatter the fish to Kingdom come. Still, I always looked with envy at the Johnson Sea Horses resting at the Vestergaard dock, wallowing in rainbow-colored slicks of their own making.

Beside the long row, the path to Emerson Bay took you across a stretch of the open part of Okoboji where the wind's reach was several miles. White caps dashed my perch dreams most days.

But tonight we were safe in the lee waters of Millers Bay. The only danger was the nightly loop into the bay by the Queen—flagship of the Iowa navy. Huge, double-decked and sleek, the ship was akin to the HMS Titanic for us dry landers from southern Iowa.

When it made its tourist-laden voyages around Okoboji even teenagers would stop their mock fights on

swimming platforms to admire its majesty.

Just after the Queen passed us and turned into an Arnolds Park heading my dad announced, last pass. But we've only just begun I thought. The now-familiar wobble of the Lazy Ike lure had been uninterrupted in its deep swim across the rock pile. When Zing...Whir...the lock on the Pflueger reel was no match for whatever was suddenly stripping off its braided line. "*Got the bottom?*" my dad asked.

"*No, it's a FISH!*" I screamed, fighting to get control of a rod that had come alive.

"*Keep the rod tip up,*" dad encouraged.

I cranked furiously on the reel handle.

"*Don't horse the fish! Let him run!*" My dad was screaming now.

But none of this fatherly direction made any sense to me. All I knew was I had to get this fish of a lifetime into the boat. Fast!

Finally it was alongside the boat, frenetically thrashing the water. Dad made an errant stab at it with the net, then another. The clamor was now in the bottom of the boat. I dropped the rod and clicked on my L-shaped Boy Scout flashlight. Under the tangle of fish line, net and spilled tackle box, still leaping about, an unimaginably huge walleye!

I wondered why the return row to the yellow light at the end of the Vestergaard dock was in slow motion. This news, this fish, had to be announced to every kid and every adult in the resort! Sadly, since it was after 10:00 o'clock, all the cabins were dark. Not trusting my still-trembling hands, dad transferred my fish from boat to live box at mid-dock.

While racing to our log cabin I was scared to a halt by a voice out of the darkness.

*Did you find them?* It was Mr. Vestergaard, behind the glow of his pipe.

"*Yes, yes we did,*" I said. "*Do you want to see him?*"

"*It'll wait for daylight,*" Mr. Vestergaard said with that familiar smile.

In the morning, at the first hint of daylight, I was positioned near the live box on the dock like a guide at a museum waiting for the first admirers. Word spread fast, especially among the kids, and soon all had been granted a peek at my rare and beautiful fish. Later, dad restrung my now-famous catch for a photograph. It was then my job to free the fish again into the live box. But when I laid him down on the dock to pull the stringer from his lips he flexed his body mightily and flopped into the lake.

Devastated didn't begin to describe me as I trudged head down toward our cabin. Along the way Mr. Vestergaard, who had witnessed the tragic chain of events from his porch, put his arm around my shoulder and said, "*Don't fret Billy, I know an even better walleye spot.*" 